

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Homeland vs. Hostland: Belonging and Challenges in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*

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## Abstract

The awareness of belonging existed long time more than it is documented. Although some people feel accommodated in the land they are hosted, some think staying in your place of origin is the best alternative: while others transform their hostland into their homeland as they end up being more comfortable in their newly created space. This study interrogates the view that home is an abode of origin. "Home" in this study is not only conceived as a place of origin but a space of belonging. Migration, misrepresentation and untold history of some nations have caused many people to go homeless. The movement of people in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* is caused by both push and pull factors. The African-Americans in *Flyin' West* are pushed by discrimination, lack of opportunities and poor treatment from the South; and pulled by freedom, peace, security and ownership of lands to the West. These factors make Nicodemus, Kansa, both homeland and hostland for the people who migrated from Memphis, New Orleans, London etc. Though some hostlands may not be favourable for the emigrants, staying there seems better than some places of origin. The study has as finding that the encounter between the host nations and home nations brings about conflict at the level of class, race and gender which makes the place both friendly and hostile. The struggle to belong causes some characters to identify more with the hostland, mimic and assimilate their lifestyles, and at the end reject their own identities. Declining one's identity doesn't stop others to come back "home", identify with their kinds and decentre the hostland and make it theirs. The study therefore concludes that, in order to build a "good home" be it in the host/homeland, one should be able to embrace one's identity, peace, justice, freedom, equality and communalism.

**Keywords:** Homeland, Hostland, Belonging, Encounters, West.

## 1. Introduction

Belonging can be an intentional or an unintentional act. Some people tend to belong and adapt in a certain environment in spite of the challenges because that is where they find themselves and movement may seem difficult. While others stay or move to particular environments because they find some comfort and peace, others forcefully try to belong in other places because of what they stand to benefit in a place where they do not consider it to be their home. Moving from one place to another is not something new and there is no certainty to see it stop anytime soon. The development in the world today and the

challenges that come with the changing time have given many reasons for people to move. The lifestyle of the Africans that were taken to America has been characterised by a lot of movements given that they have been in constant search for equality, peace and security in a land that to an extent still doesn't see them as its members till date. During the period of slavery and slave trade, Africans were taken from a place they consider home and made slaves in the land of another. This led to the death of many of them and the ones who survived the journey continued to live in torture in the hands of their white perpetrators who does not see them as equals. In spite of the abolition

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of slavery, slave trade and the number of Amendments passed in the United States for the liberation of the blacks, they were still being treated as the "others". After accepting the discrimination and oppression from the whites, the blacks start fighting for their liberations. Though there exists racial discrimination in the United States, some areas were worse than others. This equally made the African Americans to consider another migration. Pearl Cleage is one of the African American writers who uses her writings to document such historical realities. These movements were fostered by both the push and the pull factors.

## 2. Migration and its Push Factors

There are so many factors that can push people to move from one place to the other. Sexual abuse is one of the factors that pushes the characters in Pearl Cleage's play, *Flyin' West*, to leave Memphis to the west. Women have always been victims of sexual harassment and it is still ongoing even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though some women can be blamed for being abused, others are just victims of it. In any case, it is wrong to sexually abuse someone, be it man or woman no matter the justification. African American women suffered a lot of torture and sexual abuse from their slave masters as slaves and from their fellow black men. The abolition of slavery and slave trade did not put an end to it since women are still sexually abused till today. Pearl Cleage's play understudy exposes the torture African American women go through in the hands of the men without any iota of guilt as they work in the plantations. The black women were sexually harassed by the whites so they could have children who will serve them as labourers:

**MISS LEAH:** (Resumes her braiding) *I was only thirteen when I got my first one. They wanted me to start early cause I was big and strong. Soon as my womanhood came on me, they took me out in the barn and put James on me. He was older than me and big. He already had children by half the women on the place. My James... (A beat) But that first time, he was hurting me so bad and I was screamin' and carryin' on somethin' awful and that old overseer just watchin' and laughin' to make sure James really doin' it. He watch us every night for a week and after the third one I hear James tryin' to whisper somethin' to me real quiet while he doin' it. I was so surprised I stopped cryin' for a minute and I hear James sayin' "Leah, Leah, Leah..." He just kept sayin' my name over and over. (A beat) At the end of the week, I had got my first son" ... (Perkins and Uno, 1996: 94-95)*

The white slave owners will harass the women and even push black men to do same just to increase the labourers in their plantations. Since most of the whites are owners of plantations and cannot do the jobs themselves or employ other whites to do such minimal jobs, they are placed in the position to make use of the blacks as their labourers. In order to get the job done faster and to get more benefits, there is an increase in the demand for labourer and only the black women are expected to do the supply through any means. As such, black women are sexual abused not only to satisfy the selfish desires of the whites but also to increase the labour market. The woman's health or emotions is not even taken into consideration. A woman could be paired with anyone even if she doesn't know or love the person. As a young woman, once you attain a childbearing age, it means you are fit to increase the labour market. The woman's condition after childbirth is not a concern to them since they are forced to continue the hard labour immediately after given birth. In order to prevent their children from becoming slaves and receiving the poor treatments they envisage, some black women resort in killing their children, while some give birth to them with the hope that things will change one day and the children will be free. Miss Leah recounts her past memories after childbirth in a detailed manner:

**MISS LEAH:** *... Got up the next morning and strapped him on my back and went back out to the field. Overseer didn't notice him 'til the day half over. What you got there nigger? He say to me. This here my son, I say. I callin' him Samson like in the bible 'cause he gonna be strong! Overseer laugh and say, good! Colonel Harrison always lookin' for strong niggers to pick his cotton. I want to tell him that not what I got in mind for my Samson, but I kept my mouth shut like I had some sense. I ain't never been no fool" (Perkins and Uno, 1996: 80)*

Most black women could only find solace from the Bible where they think their help comes from. Miss Leah wants the best for her son not considering that her son's life is dependent on whatever decision her master will take concerning him. Just like every other mother, Miss Leah wishes to see her son alive, healthy and strong, whereas the overseer looks at the benefit of his strength to his plantation. Though they have contrary view of the strength of Samson, Miss Leah is unable to express herself or what she wants for her son since it may lead to his death or even worsen their living condition. Neither the health condition of a black woman nor the state of the child is regarded.

After childbirth, the black women are not given the chance to spend time with their children. This makes most of them to endure pain in order to have their children only at night so as to lie before having them and spend some time with them before they are being taken away from them:

**MISS LEAH:** ...Overseer make you squat right down beside the field and drop your baby out like an animal. All ten of my sons was born after sundown cause that was the only way to be sure I could lay down to have 'em.

**FAN:** How did your babies know it was night time?

**MISS LEAH:** I knew it! If I felt 'em tryin' to come early, I'd hold 'em up in there and wouldn't let 'em. Bad enough bein' born a slave without that peckerwood overseer watchin' 'em take the first breath of life before their daddy done seen if they a boy or a girlchild. (79)

The torture and torments the black women were going through in Memphis pushes them to consider moving when the opportunity shows up. The white men abuse and even rape the black women because there is no law protecting the blacks in Memphis. Given that the whites are the majority and possess a certain level of power and advantages over the blacks because of their skin colours, the continually make the coloured people to be at their mercy:

**SOPHIE:** Well, I knew it was the right thing to do. Memphis was full of crazy white men acting like when it came to colored people, they didn't have to be bound by law or common decency. Dragging people off in the middle of the night. Doing whatever they felt like doing. Colored women not safe in their own houses. Then I heard there were Negroes going west. (91)

The suffering, cruelty and discrimination against the coloured people at Memphis placed them in a position where they could only consider migrating and analysing the treatment in another environment — the reason they decide to move westward. Moving to the west was an opportunity for the coloured people to find peace and become land owners.

Violence can be seen as another aspect of migration. Minnie, the youngest of the three sisters, may have considered visiting her sisters in Nicodemus, Kansas because of the unfair treatment she receives from her husband, Frank. Frank bullies her at will and even beats her up before they travelled to Kansas and left some scars on her face that she tries to hide using a hat. In order to cover his brutal actions towards her, Minnie tries to defend him by giving excuses for

the scars though her sisters could not find any valid reasons to believe her story:

**MINNIE:** I bought a new dress for the trip...and I...wanted to show it to Frank ...and I...the train... I stumbled in the train compartment. You know how clumsy I am. I bumped my head so hard I saw stars! And this is what I've got to show for it. Frank made me promise to be more careful. He worries so about me. (An awkward pause. They don't believe her.) I told him I used to be much worse. Remember that time I almost fell off the roof? I would have killed myself if it hadn't been for Sophie. (86)

Minnie tries to cover her husband, Frank, up even though he gets her well beaten and left some scars on her. She is aware that her sisters will not find such actions funny and may want to revenge against him, so she tries to protect him. Loving him and seeing him as the only coloured companion in a typically white environment, London, makes her to endure every treatment given her. Minnie's sisters are very protective of her knowing that she may not only be young but also naïve. Sophie, the protagonist of the play and the eldest of the sisters, expresses her discomfort with the way women are treated and even killed by the same people they call husbands:

*You know as well as I do there are no laws that protect a woman from her husband. John beat Belle for years and we knew it. And because the Sheriff didn't do anything, none of us did anything either. It wasn't a crime until he killed her! I'm not going to let that happen to Minnie. I'm going to watch him prance across this yard and then I'm going to step out on my front porch and blow his brains out (110).*

Both the black and white men see themselves as superior to the women and feel that they can beat and treat them as they please. Sophie has been an eye witness to a woman who was beaten and killed by her own husband and doesn't want to see that happened to her sisters. She promises to deal with anyone who tries to treat her sisters, especially Minnie, poorly. Not only Sophie can testify to the violent treatment of women, but other women too can. Miss Leah, the oldest woman in the play and a neighbour to the sisters explains that "... this is still the state of Kansas, a part of the United States of America. Men beat their wives every day of the week includin' Sunday, and white folks cheat colored folks every time they get a mind to" (41). The violent actions of these men and the racial discrimination pushed the coloured people to move from one environment to the other. Though

there is a level of freedom in Kansas, this does not cancel oppression entirely given that some group of persons are still treated poorly.

The emergence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) to maintain white supremacy is another factor that pushes the African Americans to move westward. These whites in order to prove that they are more than the blacks attack their homes, beat them in public and kill many of them, especially those who resisted to go back to their slave masters. Sophie explains that "Colored folks' lives aren't worth two cents in that town." (Perkins and Uno, 1996: 88). African Americans were not even regarded as humans not to talk of being treated as one. The blacks are not the only ones treated poorly but also whites that are in support of the rights of the African Americans. Once you are caught talking or fighting for the rights of the colored, living becomes problematic for you. Lynching without any investigation becomes the order of the day as long as a coloured person is involved. Miss Leah highlighted some of the reasons why people left Memphis:

**MISS LEAH:** *That's cause some of them ain't never had nothin' that belonged to 'em. Some of them come cause they can't stand the smell of the city. Some of them just tired of evil white folks. Some of 'em killed somebody or wanted to. All everybody got in common is they plunked down twelve dollars for a piece of good land and now they tryin' to live on it long enough to claim it"* (76)

In spite of the treatment the coloured people received, they still had no right to own anything including themselves. They were seen as properties of their masters and could only dance to whatever they say. These maltreatment and killing of the blacks by "evil white folk" pushed them to leave Memphis to find refuge and peace somewhere else.

The rediscovery of the African heritage is another factor that pushes the African Americans from the South to the West. Since blacks were the people encouraged to move to the west and acquire a piece of land, they saw it as an opportunity to come together and promote their cultural heritage. The consciousness that they will be in the same space with people who have the same history and culture as them, is a fundamental push for migration given that they place a lot of value to their culture and history. Charles E. Farger states that;

*The American Negro is different from American whites. He has his own history, centering around the experience of slavery and its effects, and more recently*

*including the rediscovery of his African heritage. The Negro has distinct cultural patterns—patterns of speech, patterns of music and dance, patterns of self-expression and relationship—which may have been produced by this history, but which have outlived it and are now surviving on their own creative energy and integrity. These like white ethnic characteristics will not and should not disappear in the future. It is indeed insidious "subterfuge for white supremacy" to expect blacks to abandon this heritage as the price explicit or implicit for integration via assimilation into America's "mainstream" (1967: 5).*

African Americans have a very rich cultural heritage that is so unique to them. Their history is an inspiration to them as they try to keep it by passing it down to their children through storytelling, music and dance. The blacks in America communicate their past and present situation to one another and try to see how they can make themselves better in the midst of the whites who try to oppress and look down on them. Most African American writers use their writings not only as a weapon to expose and fight against inequality, discrimination and injustice, but also to expose the rich cultural heritage of their people through their style of writing. In an Anthology written by Kathy Perkins, Pearl Cleage defines her style and reason for writing as follows:

*As a third-generation black nationalist and a radical feminist, the primary energy that fuels my work is a determination to be part of the ongoing worldwide struggle against racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. I approach my work first as a way of expressing my emotional response to oppression, since no revolution has ever been fuelled purely by intellect, no matter what the boys tell you; second, as a way to offer analysis, establish context, and clarify point of view; and third to incite my audiences or my readers to action. My work is deeply rooted in, and consciously reflective of African American history and culture since I believe that it is by accurately expressing our very specific and highly individual realities that we discover our common humanity."* (1996: 68)

The desire to see an America free of discrimination and hatred for one race is what Cleage is preaching in her writings. African Americans have been treated as strangers in their own land for so many years by their white counterparts. Their history and culture were either ignored or misrepresented by the whites who think they are superior to them. This makes Cleage to attempt to "create a place [for the blacks] that feels

like home when [they] are so far from home" (Mitchell & Taylor, 2009: 210). Memphis appears more like a hostland to the blacks since the treatments they receive is unfavourable for them. This unfavourable condition pushes them to leave Memphis and move to the West where they think it will be more accommodating. The playwright herself has gone through some degree of discrimination and oppression and discovers that there is need to expose it in order to see it change as she explains that:

*My response to the oppression I face is to name it, describe it, analyze it, protest it, and propose solutions to it as loud[ly] as I possibly can every time I get the chance. I purposely people my plays with fast-talking, quick-thinking black women since the theater is, for me, one of the few places where we have a chance to get an uninterrupted word in edgewise. (46)*

Based on her experiences as an oppressed woman in the United States due to her colour and gender, Cleage takes upon herself not only to talk about it in *Flyin' West* but also to expose the strength of a black woman if given the opportunity. She makes us understand that the blacks, including the black women are very powerful, intelligent, creative, hardworking and accommodating. The communal nature of the blacks that moved westward is a virtue to uphold and a unique characteristics of the Africans and the African Americans.

Furthermore, the separate but equal and the Jim Crow laws are pushed factors that make the blacks to feel unwanted in the South and other areas. The false equality preached by the "power that be" affects the blacks greatly since they had many limitations even though equality was preached. The blacks were not permitted to enter certain places that whites could enter. They were separated even at the levels of the church, residential areas, hospital, taxi cabs, zoo and supermarkets. Harvard Sitkoff mentions the level of inequality against the blacks in *The Struggle for Black Equality* that:

*Atlanta passed a law that forbade blacks and whites from visiting the municipal zoo at the same time, while Mississippi insisted on separated taxi cabs, and Oklahoma segregated its telephone booths. Florida and North Carolina did not permit white students to use textbooks that had been touched by black students. There was one hospital bed available for every 139 American whites in the 1920s, but only one for every 1,941 blacks. (1993: 56)*

The level of segregation in the southern part of America was unbearable for the blacks. Ironically, papers had it that there was equality for all but the treatment of the black gives a contrary message which could hardly be seen because of their minority status. In the article, "Origin of Jim Crow Laws" it is indicated that, by the 1870s, "violence against people of colour rose in many southern states and it did not spare mothers, daughters, and children" (1999: 41). All these laws were against the coloured who were at the mercy of the whites. When the Homestead Act which gives opportunity for blacks to move to the west, become landowners and attained freedom was passed, most blacks who have been working for the whites without any payment or benefit see it as an opportunity to work and earn for themselves and also to become landowners. This land (320 acres) were stolen from the Native Americans and given to US citizens who were anxious to migrate to the west.

### 3. Migration and its Pull Factors in *Flyin' West*

Moving to another environment may not be all convenient or easy. Staying and coping in a new place comes with its own huddles. Even with the uncertainty of how a new place may be, some certain reasons pull people to move to new locations. In Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*, characters were pushed by some factors and pulled by other factors to migrate. The search for a better life and the desire to own lands and houses are some of the reasons that pulled the sisters to the west. This is clearly stated when Sophie says "I'll have enough when I can step outside my door and spin around with my eyes closed and wherever I stop, as far as I can see, there'll be nothing but land that belongs to me and my sisters" (74). The Homestead Act of 1862 caused most blacks in America to move since it gave them the privilege to acquire and own lands in the west. Most of the blacks see this as an opportunity to escape the torture from their masters that comes with no reward. They see this as a privilege to join the working class. When Minnie was presented with a paper that shows her own portion of the land on her birthday, her husband's intention is to sell it in order to meet up with a lifestyle he cannot afford. Minnie resisted him when she tells him that "None of that matters! Can't you see that none of that matters! This is the land that makes us free women, Frank. We can never sell it! Not ever!" (104). Owning a land is associated with gaining freedom.

The search for freedom is one of the factors that pulled

the African American to the west. The desire to be free from slavery, dehumanization and inequality in the South and London makes the blacks to consider migration. The West is more accommodating to them and they have opportunities to express themselves, own property and even work on their own—they are left with no option but to consider the breakthrough. The women desire to be free not only from the whites, but also from any oppressor irrespective of the race. When Frank beats Minnie for rejecting his request to have her portion of the land sold, Sophie could not take it and starts devising strategies on how to get back at him. According to her, she cannot fight against the whites for the freedom of a black race and women and her fellow black man wants to take away that freedom from her and her family:

**SOPHIE:** *This morning, while I was standing in that church painting a picture of the future of this town, he beat her and did God knows what else to her in this house. Where she's always been safe. We can't let him do that, Fan. All the dreams we have for Nicodemus, all the churches and schools and libraries we can build don't mean a thing if a colored woman isn't safe in her own house. (110)*

What is fundamental to Sophie is the freedom of a black woman from any form of oppression. She is willing to go extra miles against anyone who stands contrary to her wish. To her, having wealth with other facilities without freedom is of no use to coloured women. Sophie's desire is not only to see black women free but the entire black race. Inasmuch as she desires the black race to be free, she despises any black who does not treat his fellow blacks fairly when she explains that "Two things I'm sure of. I don't want no white folks tellin' me what to do all day, and no man tellin' me what to do all night." (80). She is very protective of the black race because she has witnessed blacks being treated as non-humans, including innocent children:

**SOPHIE:** *Of course I do! I want this town to be a place where a colored woman can be free to live her life like a human being. I want this town to be a place where a colored man can work as hard for himself as we used to work for the white folks. I want a town where a colored child can go to anybody's door and be treated like they belong there. (98)*

Black men have been working tirelessly for the white folks who do not even value their services, while black women do not only work for them but equally suffer abuses at different levels. Black children at a

very tender age are made to understand that white children are more than them in every aspect. This kills the potentials of black children and makes them look down on one another, as well as question their ability in the midst of the whites. Sophie thinks that having a society or town predominantly occupied by the blacks will change the entire narrative when she says "There'd be all colored towns, full of colored people only! That sounded more like heaven than anything else I'd heard in church" (92). She compares the freedom of the black race to heaven since there is nothing as beautiful as freedom and seeing people treated with some degree of courtesy.

Communalism and the African belief system of unity pulls the blacks in America to the West. One unique characteristic of the Africans and Africa Americans is togetherness. The blacks love to live together as family whether they are blood related or not. The communal nature of the people makes it difficult to tell if they are blood related or not. Appellations like cousins, uncles, aunties etc. are not common since everyone is either seen as a mother, father, brother or sister. This is highlighted in detail in the article "More Than a Picnic: African American Family Reunions"

*That African Americans survived at all is glorious, but much of the survival is due to the fact that they helped each other, that they took care of each other, that they extended themselves not only to blood relatives but also to others. The extended family was crucial. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, and unrelated individuals who were considered part of the family all were in the neighborhood and gave moral, psychological and financial support. Raising others' children became a natural phenomenon in African-American life. Caring for others within the family structure and community was not only a value carried over from the African legacy, but also a reaction to discrimination and the fact that many social and human services were not offered to the black community" (Vargus, 2002: 2).*

Unity is a powerful and unique strength of the black race that helps in their survival. A woman considers every child as hers, gives him/her the necessary counselling, listens and supports him/her as she will do to her own child. In Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*, Miss Leah, the oldest woman and a neighbour to the three sisters, treats them as her children while the sisters treat her as a mother in return. In the play, Frank, Minnie's mulatto husband is the only character who does not want to identify with his fellow blacks since he thinks he can pass for a white because of his

skin colour. He is seen as a threat to the unity and freedom of the black race, as such, all the coloured in the play, including Wil Paris and his wife, come together, devise a strategy and kill him:

*(She watches him as he tries to stand, but can't. He looks at her in a panic, then slumps over: dead. FAN shudders slightly: it's over. She composes herself, goes to the door and waves a signal to SOPHIE and WIL, who come immediately. WIL checks the body to be sure FRANK is dead. He nods to SOPHIE and they begin gathering FRANK'S things to remove the body. MINNIE and MISS LEAH, hearing the activity, enter from the back. MINNIE moves slowly from her injuries and from her reluctance to see the result of their collective action. They see that FRANK is dead. MISS LEAH watches MINNIE who moves toward the body then stops, looking at FRANK with a mixture of regret and relief. She approaches the body slowly, her anger and fear battling her bittersweet memories of the love she once felt for FRANK. She reaches out and touches him tentatively, realizing the enormity of what they have done. She draws back, but reaches out again, almost involuntarily, to touch his arm, his hand, his shoulder. We see her move through a complex set of emotions, ending with her knowledge of the monster FRANK had become. Her face now shows her resolve and even her body seems to gain strength. She steels herself and reaches into FRANK'S pocket to withdraw the deed. She clutches it in her hand then looks to SOPHIE, who stands watching her. MINNIE takes a step toward SOPHIE and extends the deed to her in anticipation of SOPHIE demanding the return of the deed. Instead, SOPHIE re-closes MINNIE'S hand around the deed and gently pushes MINNIE'S hand with the deed back to her. MINNIE, grateful and relieved, and finally safe, clutches the deed to her chest with both hands.) (113)*

The search for freedom, unity and security cause the women, with the assistance of Wil to kill Frank that they see as a threat to their freedom, peace, togetherness and security. Selling Minnie's portion of the land to white settlers would have been a problem to their unity and freedom and the only way to avoid it silently was to do away with the oppressor and the 'black leg' in their midst. The bond shared by the coloured people (excluding Frank) makes it very easy for them to accomplish their mission. Even Frank's wife, Minnie, could not save him from being killed. Though she was not courageous enough at the beginning, the stage direction tells us that she is relieved, grateful and finally safe after her husband is killed and her deed returned to her.

The desire to bond with family (and race), valorise her culture and learn the history of her people is another aspect that pulled Minnie from London to the west. Minnie lives in London with her abusive husband, Frank. There, she is unable to enjoy the cultural heritage of the blacks since it is dominantly made up of whites. Her husband that shares that with her does not even identify himself as a black. Minnie yearns to know more about the history of her people and bonding with them again after a while. Though she has lived away from her people for some time, the culture of celebrating and mourning with one another did not leave her—it was an integral part of her. These aspects pulled her back to Nicodemus, Kansas as she expresses how she misses the coloured people:

**MISS LEAH:** *Do you ever miss colored people?*

**MINNIE:** *I miss colored people so much sometime I don't know what to do!*

**MISS LEAH:** *Well, that's good to hear. I thought you might be getting as tired of Negroes as Frank seems to be.*

**MINNIE:** *Frank doesn't mean any harm. He just doesn't feel like we do about Negroes. He might miss a friend or two, but when I ask him if he doesn't ever just miss being in a big group of Negroes, knowing that we are all going to laugh at the same time and cry at the same time just because we're all there being colored, he just shakes his head. I don't think he's ever felt it, so he can't miss it. (95)*

Unlike Minnie who misses to be around coloured people, Frank hates everything being coloured. To Minnie, Frank's reaction towards the coloured people may be because he does not know their culture and has never lived in a group with them. Even at that, people adapt to environment, especially the ones that can accommodate them. In Frank's case, he vehemently refuses to identify with the coloured people because he has been deceived to think that his skin colour is superior to theirs. Minnie's reaction coming back to Nicodemus is contrasted to that of Frank as she finds it peaceful and comfortable.

Migration is a common phenomenon and people are bound to move for different reasons. No one will deliberately want to stay in an uncomfortable condition except they are trapped. The movement of people in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* is caused by both the pull and the push factors. As people are being attracted to move to other areas to advance in their lives and create a better home for themselves, others

are pushed to move because of their living conditions to other areas which will either serve as a home or hostland to them.

#### 4. Homeland or Hostland?

A homeland is defined by some scholars as a place of birth or origin while a hostland is seen as a place of visit. Different from the schools of thoughts that define it in that manner, this paper sees a homeland as a place of comfort, peace and security and a hostland as a hostile environment filled with discrimination, insecurity and inequality. A homeland for one can be a hostland for another depending on how they are treated or how they perceive it. In Cleage's *Flyin West*, Nicodemus, Kansas, Memphis and London are considered homelands for some people and hostlands for others. Frank, Minnie's husband sees London, his place of origin, as his homeland and considers where his wife calls home, Kansas, as his hostland even though Nicodemus, Kansas is more accommodating to him. In an interaction between Frank, Minnie and Fannie, one can tell from Frank's reaction that he does not see or take Nicodemus as a homeland:

**MINNIE:** *That's just what I told him. We're family! This isn't like coming for a visit. This is coming home.*

**FRANK:** *But we have a home, don't we, darling?*

**MINNIE:** *Yes, of course we do. We have a lovely home.*

**FAN:** *And you're going to tell me all about...*

**FRANK:** *(Interrupts her) And where is our home, Minnie?*

**MINNIE:** *Frank... (He stares at her coldly.) It's in London.*

**FRANK:** *So this is really a visit, just like I said, isn't it?*

**MINNIE:** *(Softly) Yes, Frank" (85)*

Coming back to Nicodemus is a homecoming for Minnie. She finds peace, love and security there unlike in London where she was stock to take every reaction and action from her husband. While in London, Minnie is helpless in the hands of Frank as he beats her at will and she has no one to complain or even talk to. Frank on the other hand does not feel at home in Kansas though he is given the opportunity to. He finds everything problematic and just wants to get his way out of the place. Though he is welcome and treated well in Kansas, he feels he deserves a better life than what he is receiving. Frank finds Nicodemus as a nice place but refuses to consider it as a homeland

when he say "...I must admit your home is lovely. This table wouldn't be out of place in the finest dining rooms. (88). The fact that he feels superior and entitled more than the coloured people in Kansas makes him not to identify with them, hence, interacting and feeling free with them becomes a problem. Frank sees Nicodemus, Kansas as a hostland, a place of visit and not a place to stay. To him, London is his home, but ironically his half-brothers there refuse to identify with him. It becomes worst when his father dies—all his inheritance are taken from him and he is left at the crossroads:

**MINNIE:** *I'm so sorry!*

**FRANK:** *Are you? Sorry for what? Marrying a bastard?*

**MINNIE:** *Don't say that!*

**FRANK:** *Do you know what this means? This means I've got nothing. Not a dime. Nothing.*

**MINNIE:** *You can sell your books.*

**FRANK:** *Don't be so stupid. (Pacing) They think they can make me an ordinary Negro. That's what they think. They think they're going to have a chance to treat me colored and keep me here where every ignorant white man who walks the street can make me step off to let him pass. They think they can pretend I'm nothing and—presto—I'll be nothing.*

**MINNIE:** *You won't let them do that.*

**FRANK:** *Let them? They've done it! We don't even have passage back to London. We're stuck here being niggers. Common, ordinary, niggers! (104)*

Frank refuses to identify with the people that could consider or treat him like a family because he feels superior to them. Unfortunate for him, the same people he tries to identify with reject him because they don't see him as their kind. This causes him to lose all his inheritance as his half-brothers refuse to see him as a member of their family. His greatest fear is to be considered as a Negro though he is one. He is deprived from going to the same London he brags of to be his home. At this point, he does not belong anywhere since both Nicodemus and London are hostlands for him.

After being rejected by his brothers and his inheritance taken away from him, Frank tries to deceive Minnie to sell her portion of the land to white speculators so they can have money to go back to London. It is in this scene that we understand that his intention is to show-



off to his brothers that he can make it with or without them, whereas, he cannot boast of any property of his own— he depends on his wife's piece of land. Even though Frank is dependent, pride will not leave him to admit it because of the superiority complex he tries to maintain:

**MINNIE:** *Sophie would never sell this land to speculators. Not for a million dollars.*

**FRANK:** *It wouldn't be all of it. Just your fair share. The town is full of people looking to buy some of this land before your sister gets that damn rule passed. This is the chance we've been waiting for. A chance for me to get back on my feet. To show my brothers I don't need their money.*

**MINNIE:** *They're not your brothers. They don't even claim you!*

**FRANK:** *They don't have to claim me. I look just like them!*

**MINNIE:** *No, Frank. I can't ask Sister to split up this land.*

**FRANK:** *I'm your husband. Don't you ever tell me no!*

**MINNIE:** *Don't, Frank! (Moving quickly out of reach) I don't care what you do to me, but I won't let you hurt our baby!*

**FRANK:** *(He grabs her arm and brings her up against him sharply.) Don't you ever threaten me as long as you live, do you understand me? Do you? (She nods silently.) I'll kill you right now, Min. I'll break your damn neck before your precious sisters can hear you holler. I'll kill everybody in this house, don't you understand that? You want to know who I told those white men you were, Min? You really want to know? (She struggles again, but he holds her.) I told them you were a black whore I won in a card game. (He laughs and presses his mouth to hers roughly.) (Blank) (105-106)*

Frank, who has been very brutal to Minnie while in London (her hostland), thinks he could continue the same brutality even in her homeland because he is married to her. As a man, he expects his wife to say yes to whatever he asks of her. He does not want to see reasons with her since he is only interested in satisfying his selfish desires. He is not even proud of his wife though he depends on her for his lifting. Even with the treatment she gets from him, Minnie still tries to justify her husband's behaviour to her sisters and explains to them that his reaction is because of

the hatred he gets from his brothers. Sophie thinks that, his brothers don't owe him anything: he feels disappointed because he was dependent on them.

Furthermore, Frank introduces Minnie to the whites as a prostitute he won in a card game because he wants to keep a particular standard with them. When he gets involved in gambling with some of them and loses, he still accuses his wife for bringing him bad luck because of her skin colour as he says "You're too black to bring me any good luck. All you got to give is misery. Pure D misery and little black pickaninnies just like you" (99). Frank hates everything black including his wife and he is ashamed to introduce her in public and even bullies her for bringing him bad luck. To him, it was Minnie's presence that takes away the luck from him. He associates everything black to be evil and bad luck. These actions (beating Minnie and forcing her to sell her portion of the land) cause the sisters to see him as a threat and an oppressor who does not have anything to offer. His pride and ignorance is exposed in the following lines:

*Not me! (Laughs, coughs a little) Soon as we get everything signed and proper, good-bye Niggerdemus! Hello London! They treat me like a human being over there. You wouldn't believe it. Half the people we know don't even know I'm colored. I told Min if she was just a couple of shades lighter, we could travel first class all over the world. Nobody would suspect a thing. (Laughs, coughs a little, loosens his tie) Don't get me wrong. I don't outright pass. I just let people draw their own conclusions. (Coughs harder as Fan watches impassively) Can you get me a glass of water, please? I feel a little...strange (113).*

Frank wants Minnie to live another person's identity like he is doing. Unlike Minnie who has experienced different cultures but still has a sense of belonging, Frank does not belong anywhere. He claims to be treated better in London than in Nicodemus, whereas, he does not even have a passage to London. Although Frank is of a mixed race just like Sophie, he despises the black side of him and valorises the white side. Even in the midst of Minnie's sisters, he still calls their homeland "Niggerdemus" as such, painting it lower than where he is coming from. He sees the blacks as less humans as compared to himself. In order to protect their precious homeland from oppressors, the sisters, with the help of Miss Leah and Wils, plot and kill him with an apple pie.

Different from Frank who does not belong anywhere, Minnie is comfortable in her home and adapts again

after staying in London, her hostland for some time. Fannie thinks Minnie will be very comfortable living in London than in Nicodemus when she says "I think our baby sister is having so much fun out there in the world, coming back here is probably the last thing on her mind." (82). Contrary to what she thinks, Minnie has been home sick and could not even wait to come back home. Immediately she comes back from London, she wants Miss Leah to braid her hair which her husband finds disgusting because he wants her to live a different lifestyle from the other coloured women: Minnie is comfortable in her home and adapts again after staying in London, her hostland, for some time. Immediately she comes back, without spending up to twenty-four hours, she wants her hair braided, a style she used to do before she left for London:

**FRANK:** *What have you done to your hair?*

**MINNIE:** *Miss Leah braided it for me like she used to. Do you like it?*

**FRANK:** *I've never seen you with your hair in plaits.*

**MINNIE:** *Yes you have. I was wearing braids when you met me.*

*(Frank and Minnie exit to the yard)*

**FRANK:** *(Angrily) I want you to put your hair back the way it was.*

**MINNIE:** *I always wore my...*

**FRANK:** *You look like a damn pick niddy! We haven't been here*

*twenty-four hours and look at you!*

**MINNIE:** *I'm sorry...*

**FRANK:** *You're always sorry, aren't you? Of course you are, but it you*

*weren't so busy being sorry, you'd know there are some interesting*

*things going on in Nicodemus these days. (96)*

The fact that Frank doesn't identify with his wife's environment, culture and lifestyle gets the sisters annoyed. Though Minnie tells him sorry, she does not remove the braid on her hair because she sees it as an aspect of identity which identifies her with her people and makes her feel at home again. Frank wants her to continue living like a Londoner even while out of London. Minnie's resistance shows that she feels empowered and entitled in Nicodemus than she used to be in London. She tries to negotiate her

belonging even with the obstacles from her husband. Frank's reaction is an indication that he does not want his wife to adapt to the lifestyle of her homeland. He finds it difficult to attain this because Minnie is the one longing for security from her sisters and home. She has come home and her sisters are there to protect and fight for her. She embraces home and the comfort in it after staying in her hostland for some time. Staying in London and coping with their lifestyle is like living another person's identity to Minnie. That is the reason she is unable to wait twenty-four hours to change her hair and embrace her culture again. As a way to welcome her back home and celebrate their freedom, a ritual ceremony of holding hands, making declarations and embracing one another is conducted.

Furthermore, Memphis is considered a homeland to the privileged whites and a hostland to the helpless Negroes who were stuck there to work for the whites without any profit or reasonable treatment. The Negroes become used to the life of suffering to the point that they cannot think of having a better life elsewhere. When the chance to migrate and find a better life and opportunity arises, some were still sceptical because they feel it is going to be worse than their present location. Sophie explains that "The day [their] group left Memphis, there were at least two hundred other Negroes standing around, rolling their eyes and trying to tell [them they] we didn't know what it was going to be like way out [there] in wilderness. I kept trying to tell them it doesn't matter what it's like. Any place is better than there!" (89). These stranded and hopeless Negroes do not have a place they can call home. They are forced to stay in Memphis even with the harsh condition because they are afraid to leave from worse to worst. The ones who are optimistic and passionate to find a home out of their hostland, like Sophie and her sisters, undertake the journey and finally find a home in Nicodemus. Nicodemus becomes their homeland as it gives them the privilege to become leaders and landowners. It also gives them many opportunities, brings peace, security and freedom which affected their psychological, physical and emotional states:

**FAN:** *Sophie found her laugh out here. I don't remember ever hearing her laugh the whole time we were in Memphis. But everything in Kansas was funny to her. Sometimes when we first got here, she'd laugh so hard she'd start crying, but she didn't care. One time, she was laughing so hard I was afraid she was going to have a stroke. She scared me to death.*

*When she calmed down, I asked her, well, why didn't you ever laugh like that in Memphis? And she said her laugh was too free to come out in a place where a colored woman's life wasn't worth two cents on the dollar. What kind of fool would find that funny, she asked me. She was right, too. Sophie's always right. (98)*

The peace found in Nicodemus, Kansas causes the sisters to laugh out without any fear. Laughing was like a criminal act to the blacks in Memphis. There was nothing that could even interest them to laugh given that their lives were characterised by painful experiences and memories. Laughing in Memphis could even put one's life at risk. The intention of the whites is to see the coloured suffer and continually live in pain and anguish as they (black) work for them (whites). The lives of the coloured had no worth in the eyes of the whites given that they kill them at will without any questioning or investigation. Going west is considered the best decision taken by the sisters and the other coloured people as it brings about freedom. This can be seen from Sophie's words as she performs the rituals saying, "We choose this day to declare our lives to be our own and no one else's. And we promise to always remember the day we left Memphis and went west together to be free women as a sacred bond between us with all our trust" (Perkins and Uno, 1996: 93). The west becomes the homeland and Memphis the hostland to the coloured who were courageous enough to make a move. This decision did not only affect Miss Leah, Wils and the sisters, but it also affects the next generation represented by Minnie's daughter. In order not to forget their past as a means of shaping their future, Miss Leah narrates the predicaments of the black women to her little granddaughter and how they fight for liberation not only for themselves but for the younger generations.

## 5. Conclusion

A home is a place where love is shared. It is a place where one can find peace, comfort, stability, security and opportunities. The sisters shared love with one another, with Miss Leah and Wil. Wil finds the house of the sisters as his home since it brings him comfort and gives him a sense of belonging. Miss Leah, though a neighbour, treats the sisters as her children while the sisters treat her as a mother. Their unity and love towards one another cause them to build a comfortable home for themselves in Nicodemus. Though Memphis, London and Nicodemus are not the places of origin for the coloured people in Pearl

Cleage's *Flyin' West*, they are regarded as both hostlands and homelands. Memphis is a place of origin for the whites and they find it comfortable, therefore, it becomes their homeland. Though it is their homeland, it is considered a hostland to the Negroes who find it hostile, unsecured and challenging. As such, belonging there becomes problematic and challenging for them. In the same light, London is seen as a homeland and a place of origin to Frank's dad, half-brothers and other white inhabitants, but a hostland to both Frank and Minnie though Frank is too ignorant to see that he is not welcome there until his inheritance is taken away from him after the demise of his father. Nicodemus is not the place of origin of the sisters, Wil and Miss Leah, but it is considered as their homeland and a hostland to Frank who intentionally refuses to belong because his skin colour makes him feel superior to the other Negroes.

Coming back to my context, I will say that although Cameroon is our place of origin, it is a hostland to some people who are considered as the "other" and a homeland to those seen as the "self." With the ongoing crisis in Cameroon which started since 2016, most people coming from the North West and South West regions cannot live, not to talk of visiting their villages. Most of them are now accommodated in other areas (called Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)) and it has now become their new homelands. Their places of origin, houses and places of comfort have now become hostile and insecure for them—they are now hosts in their homelands. Others who move for security purposes are still unable to find a home in their new environment because of the uncomfortable situation and lifestyle they find themselves, while others leave their places of origin and are able to find a home in their hostlands.

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